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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 001019

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DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO WHA A/S SHANNON, DAS MADISON, S/A
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NSC FOR SENIOR ADVISOR DAN FISK

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/26/2012

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT'S SPEECH STRIKES CHORDS IN CUBA

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Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The President's October 24 speech on Cuba clearly struck several nerves on the island. Among the dissident community, especially those who attended a live screening of the speech at USINT, the speech and the appearance of close friends and relatives of Cuban political prisoners was a very emotional moment. For its part, the regime has reacted with anger and focused unprecedented coverage on the speech and the official Cuban response delivered by FonMin Perez Roque. Our diplomatic community colleagues have been curious but cautious, trying mostly to establish a message in the timing. We expect the speech has sent the regime back to their planning rooms to arrive at a long term response. The announcement of new programs and funding available is already generating even more incessant calls for our support from dissident groups that we will need to address quickly. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The much anticipated speech by President Bush on US Cuba policy is creating strong reactions on the island. Those impacted most immediately were a mix of leading dissidents and members of independent and international press who observed the speech live at USINT.

-- Relatives of group of 75 prisoner Oscar Pernet Hernandez, Jorge Luis Garcia Perez (Antunez) and Bertha Solis were especially affected by the appearance of Mirta Pernet. Elsa Morejon, wife of jailed dissident Oscar Elias Biscet, was delighted to hear the President mention her husband's name and hoped the higher profile that came from the mention of his name and those of other political prisoners would help to protect all of them.

-- Numerous contacts commented on how the speech was well-conceived to speak to the hearts and the reality of Cubans throughout the island. Former political prisoner Guillermo "Coco" Farinas focused on the President's call to members of the security forces "who do not have blood on their hands" as the most important statement in the speech. He argued that those in the security forces recognize that change is coming, and are already considering how they might be treated if the shoe moves to the other foot.

-- Leading Catholic lay commentator Dagoberto Valdes described the speech as the best ever delivered by a sitting American president because of its references to issues that confront Cubans on a daily basis.

-- The President's mention of additional funding for Cuba provoked further discussion among members of the dissident community over how more of the funds ought to go directly to the island in general, and specifically how they might get to their organizations.

There were, nonetheless, some criticisms. One dissident complained that the speech did not go as far as he would have liked in proposing ways to improve the Cuban economy. Several of the Damas de Blanco commented that they had hoped for more of an opening on the family visitation front. Leading dissident Martha Beatriz Roque commented that the speech focused too much on the US point of view, and not enough on what Cubans should be doing.

13. (C) The press and the diplomatic corps were both very interested in the speech, but tended to approach it with skepticism. The most frequently-asked question was why the speech happened when it did. Many answered their own question by saying they believed the timing was driven by the

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upcoming UN vote on the embargo, a concept we attempted to disabuse them of at every occasion. Some of our EU contacts complained that the timing of the speech would complicate follow-up to the September Troika meeting with Perez Roque on the margins of the UNGA.

14. (C) The Cuban government was clearly angry. Fidel had been preparing the way for several days with speculative "Reflections" columns in Granma that predicted that the speech would be a prelude to invasion. Though the speech turned out to be anything but that, the reaction was quick and virulent anyway. The Foreign Ministry convoked the press at 3:30 p.m., just after the speech, to hear FM Perez Roque's response. Perez Roque set out of series of 12 points, in part rejecting the points made by the President, but mostly reiterating Cuban demands that the embargo be lifted, that the US naval base at Guantanamo be closed, and that the 5 Cubans imprisoned in the US on espionage charges be released, among others. In imitation of the setting, Perez Roque introduced family members of the five Cuban spies held in the US. While arguing that the US is obsessed with Cuba, Cuban media has been dominated by the speech. In an unprecedented move, the Communist daily Granma printed an (edited) version of the entire speech, and the regime's own television program, Mesa Redonda (Round Table) showed about 14 minutes of the speech on its program that evening. Contacts in the dissident community and among Interests Section staff said they could remember no such coverage in the past. One dissident speculated that the regime now understands that a significant number of people on the island have access to information via channels like satellite television and therefore it can no longer create a complete propaganda story from a couple of carefully chosen quotes. On the other hand, some comments we have heard seem to have been influenced by seeing only the redacted version. We are distributing the full Spanish text and Spany+QQum the security forces was left in, the reference to those without blood on their hand cited above was not. All mention of the regime's failure to live up to its own economic promises also disappeared. Not

surprisingly, the entire section introducing the families of the political prisoners, which clearly had the greatest personal impact on Cubans, was dropped. The most important proposals in the speech, such as the announcement of funding for Cuba, the call for greater activity by other democracies, the initiative to provide scholarships in some Cubans (requests are already beginning to come in), and expansion of internet access, were left in by the regime. While they have mocked these suggestions in official statements, it is obvious that these are proposals the regime cannot turn into bogey men and use to flog US policy. The regime understands that they resonate with the Cuban people.

¶6. (C) COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST: The Castro regime is much more comfortable dealing with US actions that can be seen as threats to Cuban sovereignty. The points in the President's speech appealing to known concerns of the Cuban people took them out of that comfort zone. We expect that the leadership is already meeting frantically to decide how to react to this appeal to the Cuban people. For their part, the Cuban people are already beginning to react, as evidenced by the fact that we have already been approached on the scholarship proposal. A sense of change is in the air in Cuba, and so far the regime has done nothing to respond positively to it. With the knowledge that there is more

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funding available, we expect requests for assistance to expand and increase exponentially. It is therefore critical that the process for executing the proposals be launched immediately.

PARMLY